

**Technical Report 1321**

# **Applications of Strengths-Based Leadership Theory for the U.S. Army**

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**September 2012**



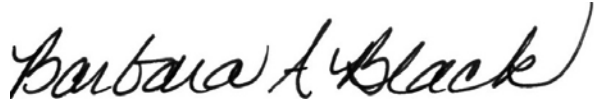
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# APPLICATIONS OF STRENGTHS-BASED LEADERSHIP THEORY FOR THE U.S. ARMY

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### Research Requirement:

Army leaders involved in current military operations around the world (e.g., Afghanistan) are faced with an increasingly complex and decentralized operational environment. According to the Chief of Staff of the Army (CSA) Gen. Odierno, the Army must evolve to meet the demands of modern warfare. Future leaders must be adaptable, agile, and able to operate in a threat environment that includes a combination of regular warfare, irregular warfare, and terrorist activity (Odierno, 2012). The unique challenges faced by Army leaders require an innovative approach to leadership and a strong emphasis on leader development. The research discussed in this report focuses on an approach to leadership that may well increase adaptability and maximize performance among junior military leaders. The strengths-based model was chosen because of its potential compatibility with Army Doctrine and its likely applicability to the next generation of Army leaders. The purpose of this research was to determine what strategies military leaders use to develop subordinate leaders and if the current developmental processes align with a strengths-based approach to leader development.

### Procedure:

Nine focus group interviews with a total of 41 active military leaders were conducted by researchers from the U.S. Army Research Institute. Interview questions were semi-structured and focused on identifying strategies military leaders use to develop subordinate leaders. Follow-up questions were utilized to gain knowledge about how military leaders facilitate the awareness and development of individual strengths, as well as the applicability of a strengths-based approach to military leader development. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using a grounded theory approach.

### Findings:

Analysis of focus group transcripts resulted in 32 themes related to developing subordinate leaders. Through comparing and aggregating these codes, the initial 32 codes were collapsed into six higher-order categories (i.e., *establishing positive climate, building subordinate capabilities, inspiring subordinates, caring for Soldiers, managing teams, and leader self-development*). The most frequently cited higher-order category was *building subordinate capabilities* (122 passages), which included five secondary categories (i.e., *developing strengths, identifying strengths and weaknesses, providing individualized feedback, modeling, and fostering personal/professional development*). The second most frequently cited higher-order category, *inspiring subordinates* (92 passages), also united five secondary categories (i.e., *motivating, empowering, establishing expectations/standards, reinforcing, and leading by example*). The leader processes described by interviewees are congruent with a strengths-based approach and are consistent with other leader competency models (Steele & Garven, 2003; Yukl, 2002). In particular, providing individualized feedback, identifying

strengths and weaknesses, taking care of Soldiers, utilizing subordinates' strengths, and empowering subordinates are widely used leader development strategies supported by strengths-based leadership theory.

#### Utilization and Dissemination of Findings:

The benefits gained from utilizing a strengths-based approach to leader development are consistent with priorities set forth by the Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. Odierno in his recent Marching Orders (Odierno, 2012). In particular, the benefits gained from utilizing a strengths-based approach are relevant to the U.S. Army's goal of building adaptable leaders and retaining capable Soldiers past their initial enlistment or commission. Additionally, introducing leaders to the ideas contained within the higher-order leadership processes could produce Soldiers who are more motivated, more satisfied with their jobs, and more efficient overall. As it stands, the research detailed in the present report will inform future work by the U.S. Army Research Institute. The results of the present project will lay the foundation for research to identify effective and efficient ways in which leaders can informally engage subordinates in leader development activities.



# APPLICATIONS OF STRENGTHS-BASED LEADERSHIP THEORY FOR THE U.S. ARMY

## CONTENTS

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	Page
INTRODUCTION .....	1
ARMY DOCTRINE .....	1
OVERVIEW OF STRENGTHS-BASED LEADERSHIP .....	2
DEVELOPING SUBORDINATE STRENGTHS .....	3
Talent Identification.....	3
Talent Integration.....	3
Behavior Change or Optimization .....	4
Benefits of Knowing Your Strength .....	4
THE PRESENT RESEARCH .....	5
METHOD .....	5
Participants and Procedure.....	5
Data Analysis .....	6
RESULTS .....	7
Establishing Positive Climate: A Higher-Order Leadership Process .....	7
Building Subordinate Capabilities: A Higher-Order Leadership Process .....	10
Inspiring Subordinates: A Higher-Order Leadership Process .....	12
Caring for Soldiers: A Higher-Order Leadership Process .....	14
Managing Teams: A Higher-Order Leadership Process .....	15
Developing Self: A Higher-Order Leadership Process.....	17
The Relationship Between Identifying, Utilizing, and Empowering Subordinates..	17
DISCUSSION .....	18
Limitations and Future Directions .....	23
CONCLUSION.....	24
REFERENCES .....	25
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS USED DURING DATA COLLECTION SESSIONS .....	A-1
APPENDIX B: THEME DEFINITIONS .....	B-1

	Page
APPENDIX C: HIGHER-ORDER, SECONDARY, AND LOWER-ORDER CATEGORIES.....	C-1

#### LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF TIMES EACH HIGHER-ORDER CATEGORY WAS IDENTIFIED IN SOLDIER INTERVIEWS.....	7
TABLE 2: FREQUENCY OF SECONDARY CATEGORIES UNITED UNDER THE HIGHER-ORDER LEADERSHIP PROCESS ESTABLISHING POSITIVE CLIMATE.....	8
TABLE 3: FREQUENCY OF SECONDARY AND LOWER-ORDER CATEGORIES UNITED UNDER THE HIGHER-ORDER LEADERSHIP PROCESS BUILDING SUBORDINATE CAPABILITIES.....	10
TABLE 4: FREQUENCY OF SECONDARY AND LOWER-ORDER CATEGORIES UNITED UNDER THE HIGHER-ORDER LEADERSHIP PROCESS INSPIRING SUBORDINATES.....	13
TABLE 5: NUMBER OF TIMES SECONDARY CODES WERE APPLIED SIMULTANEOUSLY TO THE SAME PASSAGE OF TEXT.....	19

# **Applications of Strengths-Based Leadership Theory for the U.S. Army**

## **Introduction**

The United States Army has been in the business of developing leaders for over 200 years. Intense training, strict discipline and an adherence to Army Values have created generation after generation of world-class leaders. Yet, with an Army that has been in combat for almost a decade, the military is faced with new challenges that may require a unique approach to leadership. According to CSA Gen. Odierno, leader development is critical to building an effective future fighting force and leader development programs must adapt to meet the demands of the current operational environment (Odierno, 2012). The research discussed in this paper focuses on an innovative approach to leadership, its compatibility with current Army Doctrine and leadership practices, and its potential applicability to the next generation of Army leaders. Two primary research questions are addressed by this research: (1) how do military leaders develop subordinates, and (2) how many of these approaches could be viewed as strengths-based strategies?

## **Army Doctrine**

As stated in the U.S. Army Leadership Field Manual 6-22, the Army defines leadership as "...the process of influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation while operating to accomplish the mission and improving the organization" (U.S. Department of the Army, 2006, pg. 1-2). Within Army Leadership Doctrine, organizational improvement includes a commitment to developing subordinate leaders. FM 6-22 dictates that all leaders, no matter their rank, are responsible for the development and improvement of their subordinates (U.S. Department of the Army, 2006). Military leaders create the conditions for subordinate development by constructing a positive climate, engaging in self-development, and encouraging the growth of subordinates through mentoring, coaching, counseling, and careful job assignment based on individual talent.

According to Army Leadership Doctrine, the first step in developing others is to understand what individuals do well, as well as areas for growth and development (U.S. Department of the Army, 2006). Army Doctrine is consistent with a current movement in psychology toward a strengths-based approach to leadership. The assumption underlying strengths-based leadership is that nurturing strengths, as opposed to focusing exclusively on deficiencies, creates subordinate leaders who are able to recognize and realize their full potential (Spreitzer, 2006). According to a strengths-based approach to leadership, Army leaders who focus on subordinates' strengths will be better equipped to manage and grow existing talent within their units, while at the same time building subordinates' capabilities for future leadership roles. Military leaders who understand subordinates' strengths and weaknesses are also in a better position to influence unit and organizational effectiveness through team and task assignments.

## **Overview of Strengths-Based Leadership**

Martin Seligman, one of the founders of Positive Psychology, identified three domains that could benefit from further exploration: positive personal and interpersonal traits, positive subjective experience, and positive institutions and communities (as cited in Clifton & Harter, 2003). The identification of positive personal and interpersonal traits (talents) is the foundation of strengths-based leadership (SBL). Often misconstrued, SBL does not ignore weaknesses, but instead builds on talents while understanding and managing areas for improvement.

The SBL model encourages leaders to first identify personal strengths and then attain leadership positions that cater to those strengths. Individuals who subscribe to the SBL model will avoid placing themselves in roles that demand strengths or talents they do not possess (Clifton & Anderson, 2002). By outlining clear personal and professional goals, leaders can identify positions that will allow them to apply their strengths for the good of the organization. Ideally, in the Army context, leaders' military occupational specialty or functional area would align with their strengths, allowing them to reach their maximum potential. According to both Army Leadership Doctrine and strengths-based leadership theory, only by realizing their full potential are leaders able to proficiently develop their subordinates (Rath & Conchie, 2008; U.S. Department of the Army, 2006).

Following recognition and utilization of personal strengths, the SBL model argues that identifying and capitalizing on the strengths of others is the most effective way to achieve success. Leaders who subscribe to SBL theory will recognize personal and team deficiencies and will surround themselves with individuals who possess needed knowledge, skills, and abilities (Rath & Conchie, 2008). Rather than relying on seniority or tenure, a leader using the strengths-based model will intentionally assign subordinates to positions according to their talents and strengths. By paying close attention to subordinates' strengths and weaknesses, a strengths-based leader is able to empower subordinates and build effective teams.

Another key element of SBL is caring for and developing subordinates (Rath & Conchie, 2008). This element of SBL is mirrored in Army Leadership Doctrine, but is referred to as "taking care of Soldiers" (7-11) and "teaching, counseling, coaching, and mentoring" subordinates (8-1) (U.S. Department of the Army, 2006). According to both SBL and Army Leadership Doctrine, understanding subordinates' strengths and weaknesses may inform the development of both short- and long-term goals for junior leaders. Understanding what subordinates excel at also allows leaders to assign tasks that present opportunities for further development. In addition, leaders are better able to give constructive feedback during formal and informal discussions of job performance when they are aware of subordinates' strengths and areas for growth. It is important to note that understanding and caring for subordinates goes beyond strengths identification in some organizations. For example, in the Army strengths-based leaders must also be aware of what is going on with individuals when they are not on duty, since personal problems can have life-or-death consequences on the job.

## **Developing Subordinate Strengths**

### **Talent Identification**

The most widely accepted definition of a strength is the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity (Hodges & Clifton, 2004). To develop a strength, individuals must first identify their talents - talents are naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling or behavior that serve as the foundation for strengths development (Hodges & Clifton, 2004). Identification of talents can be done formally (e.g., formal assessment and feedback) or informally through observation and self-reflection. Because people tend to gravitate toward what they are good at, such things as rapid learning, desire to participate in certain activities, and satisfaction gained from engagement in specific tasks can provide clues to a person's underlying talents. Other signs that an individual is utilizing a talent can include high levels of performance, a sense of increased energy and engagement, and the perception of "losing time" when engaged in certain activities (Linley, Govindji, & West, 2007).

### **Talent Integration**

Once a talent has been identified, it must be integrated into a person's actions. The more a talent is exercised, the stronger it becomes and the easier it is to utilize. During the integration phase of strengths development, people become better able to explain their behavior and identify who they are in terms of what they do well (Hodges & Clifton, 2004).

Integration can be supported by the organizational environment (Heinen & O' Neill, 2004). For example, leaders can help subordinates during development and integration by placing them in positions that align with their talents. Within the Army, senior leaders may also provide feedback on individual performance (e.g., mentoring, coaching, and counseling subordinates), while also creating a positive work environment where subordinates feel safe engaging in new behaviors (U.S. Department of the Army, 2006). Organizational reinforcement and integration of subordinate talent should look beyond current job performance and take into consideration the long-term development of junior leaders. That is, to maximize subordinate satisfaction and increase potential, senior leaders must help subordinates prepare for future assignments. For military leaders, this translates to the development of skills and integration of talents that will be applicable beyond the direct level of leadership and will remain useful through organizational and strategic levels of command.

After talents have been fully integrated into a person's way of thinking and behaving, the individual will realize that a change in behavior has occurred and will be more confident and productive (Hodges & Clifton, 2004). If a person feels that a position is not aligned with his or her talents and strengths, these positive outcomes will be minimized and the individual may begin looking for an alternative position that suits him or her better. In some cases this may mean leaving military assignments to seek employment in the civilian labor market.

## **Behavior Change or Optimization**

Because people tend to overlook the things they are good at, labeling talents can help bring them to the forefront of consciousness, allowing individuals to optimize and capitalize on their natural abilities. Optimizing and capitalizing occur when individuals invest time and energy to improve their talents. Several theories help explain how optimization occurs. Barbara Fredrickson's (2001) Broaden and Build theory holds that positive emotions increase a person's ability to think of options and utilize additional resources when confronted with new situations. According to the Broaden and Build theory, positive emotions produce more thoughts and actions than negative emotions, so an individual who is highly satisfied and confident in his or her position and abilities will be more resourceful when faced with a challenge.

Albert Bandura's (1994) theory of self-efficacy also helps explain how optimization might take place. According to SBL theory, when individuals invest time and energy in their talents, they are more likely to experience success. These "mastery experiences" are an important source of efficacy information and can positively affect how individuals feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave. Increased self-efficacy has also been shown to result in improved productivity and satisfaction (Bandura, 1994).

In practice, consistent investment in talents by leaders and subordinates leads to the development of personal strengths. However, certain conditions are necessary for optimization to occur. For example, social support, experiencing success, and reinforcement of strengths all motivate a person to continually utilize identified talents (Bowers, 2004). Without these conditions, individuals may fail to build on or effectively utilize their inherent abilities.

## **Benefits of Knowing One's Strengths**

Since people tend to find more enjoyment and satisfaction at doing things in which they naturally excel, strengths-based leadership may have numerous positive outcomes (Clifton & Harter, 2003). Identification of strengths has been shown to increase levels of happiness, fulfillment and confidence at home and work (Linley et al., 2007; Wilcove, Schwerin, & Kline, 2009). Support from co-workers and supervisors and positive task assignments have been shown to minimize burnout and increase productivity and job satisfaction (Baruch-Feldman, Brondolo, Ben-Dayana, & Swartz, 2002; Clifton & Harter, 2003). By impacting job satisfaction and engagement, strengths-based leaders may also observe positive performance outcomes (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002).

With high demand for leaders in two combat operations over the past decade, the Army's development programs have seen a sharp decline. Many Soldiers feel that increased deployment and combat training have decreased the amount of time they have to develop themselves and subordinates (Wardynski, Lyle, & Colarusso, 2010b). A strengths-based approach may be a viable response to these problems. By utilizing existing strengths of subordinates and allowing them to further develop predisposed skills and talents, a leader may more easily maximize the efficiency and performance of junior leaders (Bowers, 2004).

The benefits gained from strengths development are also relevant to the US Army's goal of building adaptable leaders and retaining Soldiers. FM 6-22 (U.S. Department of the Army, 2006) states that an adaptable leader will more readily comprehend challenges in a constantly changing environment, remain aware of capabilities and shortcomings, understand what it takes to perform in a given situation, and be more comfortable entering unfamiliar environments. Putting leaders in positions that play to their strengths is likely to generate positive emotions and increased self-efficacy, making it more likely that leaders will be adaptive and resourceful when faced with complex, ill-structured problems. Focusing on individual strengths could also positively impact retention. Strengths development has been shown to improve satisfaction, self-efficacy, positive emotions, and organizational commitment (Clifton & Harter, 2003), all of which contribute to higher retention rates. With better development and more tailored career paths for subordinate leaders, it may be possible to retain Soldiers beyond their initial enlistment or commission (Deery, 2008; Hanson & Miller, 2002).

### **The Present Research**

The current research explored the applicability of strengths-based leadership within a military environment. A grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to analyze data obtained during focus group sessions. Following the guidelines of grounded theory, this research was not designed for a priori hypothesis testing, but rather for generating new ideas and hypotheses for future evaluation. Building from interviews with participants and relevant leadership theory, this report describes initial themes derived from the data. Although grounded theory methodology suggests that scholars avoid deductive hypothesis testing, it also acknowledges that existing knowledge inevitably will provide sensitizing concepts for analysts to use as points of comparison. Thus, it was anticipated that themes emerging from the data would align with existing leadership competency models.

### **Method**

#### **Participants and Procedure**

Forty-one military officers were interviewed across nine focus group sessions. Participants who volunteered were both commissioned and non-commissioned officers: 2 Second Lieutenants, 11 First Lieutenants, 13 Captains, 2 Sergeants, 3 Sergeants First Class, and 10 First Sergeants. The semi-structured interviews consisted of pre-determined open-ended questions and individually adapted follow-up questions. As part of the interview process, participants were asked to identify strategies military leaders use to facilitate self-awareness and development of subordinate leaders, including strategies for developing strengths and addressing deficits in junior leaders. In addition, participants were introduced to strengths-based leadership theory and were asked to discuss advantages and disadvantages of utilizing a strengths-based approach within a military setting (see Appendix A for a detailed outline of interview questions). All interviews took place at a military installation and lasted from 60 to 120 minutes. Focus group sessions were audio recorded; all interviews were conducted and analyzed by the authors.

## Data Analysis

In keeping with grounded theory's inductive approach, the initial coding process was primarily driven by the data. Researchers assigned labels to sections of the interview text that held distinct meaning, while also taking into consideration relevant research literature (e.g., existing leader competency models), the larger narrative being described, and the research question which prompted subsequent discussion. Codes given to a passage of text were then compared to other existing codes to determine whether the text should be assigned a different code, multiple codes, or if a new code should be created altogether. This constant comparative method allowed for possible shifts in codes and coding categories as analysis progressed (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). When segments of data suggested multiple meanings, researchers used simultaneous coding to assign two or more codes to the same passage (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The use of multiple codes enabled researchers to describe complex leader behavior and to examine interrelationships among various leader activities. Two-hundred-and-three passages were coded. One-hundred-and-nine of those passages described complex behavior that encompassed more than one leader developmental activity – these passages were assigned multiple codes. In total, data analysis produced 323 codes.

Coding was guided by two primary research questions: (1) how do military leaders develop subordinates, and (2) how many of these approaches could be viewed as strengths-based strategies? After creating a large set of initial codes, researchers eliminated codes that were unrelated to the research questions. The result was 32 distinct themes related to developing subordinate leaders. In the next step researchers examined potential connections among codes and collapsed codes into manageable categories as possible. This process continued until the codes and categories coherently explained the data. In this research, for example, the statement “Not getting in their business, not micromanaging, just putting out a task and letting them accomplish it. Yeah, if they jack it up, then you get involved, but being able to step back and let them accomplish what they got to accomplish” was coded as “delegating.” Delegating, which is considered a lower-order category, was then sorted into the somewhat broader category “empowering.” Finally, empowering, a secondary category, was combined with other secondary codes to form the higher-order leadership process “inspiring subordinates.” Thus, analysis began with open coding and proceeded to higher levels of abstraction as codes were eliminated or united under higher-order categories. In practice, the steps described here were not strictly sequential. Rather, data, codes, and categories were constantly reexamined as part of an iterative process to understand the qualitative data.

Prior to data analysis the authors, who were responsible for coding the data, worked to establish interrater reliability. Instructions for coding were continually revised until an informal assessment of reliability suggested an adequate level of agreement had been reached. Once initial agreement was established, a representative sample of passages ( $n = 30$ ) was selected to test interrater reliability. Coding the sample passages was done independently and without consultation or guidance. Results suggested more practice and additional refinement of the procedures were needed to establish reliability. After additional preparation, another representative sample was selected to assess reliability for the full sample. Percent agreement was 83.3% and coding proceeded with the full sample. All passages were rated by the authors - disagreements between the two coders were resolved through discussion.



## Results

Initial analysis of focus-group transcripts resulted in 32 themes related to developing subordinate leaders (see Appendix B for definitions of the final themes). The 32 categories that emerged from the data address specific behaviors that military leaders engage in when developing subordinates. Additional analysis revealed relationships among these categories of behavior. By comparing and aggregating the initial codes, the 32 themes were collapsed into 19 secondary categories. As an example, the lower-order categories *instilling independence*, *delegating*, *task exposure*, *instilling a sense of responsibility*, and *confidence building* were combined to form the secondary category *empowering subordinate leaders*. In order of prevalence, the 19 secondary categories are *providing individualized feedback*, *identifying strengths and weaknesses*, *empowering subordinates*, *utilizing subordinate strengths*, *taking care of Soldiers*, *motivating*, *reinforcing*, *relationship/rapport building*, *establishing expectations/standards*, *open communication*, *task management*, *tolerating risks/mistakes*, *approachability*, *leading by example*, *emotion regulation*, *developing strengths*, *fostering personal/professional development*, *modeling*, and *evaluating climate through observation*.

The secondary categories were also examined for similarities and relationships. Relationships among these categories indicated higher-order themes within the data. For example, empowering and motivating subordinates, establishing expectations, reinforcing performance, and setting an example for junior military leaders are all ways senior military leaders encourage subordinates to give their best during task assignments. Thus, these categories were abstracted to a higher level leadership process labeled *inspiring subordinates*. Through comparing and aggregating the codes, the initial 32 themes were ultimately collapsed into six higher-order categories (see Table 1). These categories represent six overarching approaches military leaders use to facilitate self-awareness and development of subordinate leaders. Appendix C outlines the relationship among the higher-order, secondary, and lower-order categories. The following sections document analysis of the six higher-order categories.

Table 1  
*Number of Times Each Higher-order Category Was Identified in Soldier Interviews*

Higher-order Category	Frequency
Building Subordinate Capabilities	122
Inspiring Subordinates	92
Managing Teams	42
Establishing Positive Climate	32
Caring for Soldiers	32
Leader Self-Development	3

### Establishing Positive Climate: A Higher-order Leadership Process

In total, the leadership process *establishing positive climate* was identified 32 times throughout the coding process. As a higher-order category and leadership process, *establishing positive climate* appears to be a means through which military leaders create an environment

where subordinates can freely learn and develop. The following secondary categories were united under this higher-order theme: *emotion regulation, evaluating climate through observation, allowing open communication, and tolerating risk and mistakes* (see Table 2).

Table 2  
*Frequency of Secondary Categories United Under the Higher-order Leadership Process Establishing Positive Climate*

Secondary Category	Frequency
Allowing Open Communication	9
Tolerating Risk/Mistakes	9
Approachability	7
Emotion Regulation	6
Evaluating Climate through Observation	1

According to Army Leadership Doctrine, military leaders can facilitate positive working conditions by exhibiting self-control, balance, and stability (U.S. Department of the Army, 2006). In the present project, six Soldier reports highlighted the importance of setting a personal example for subordinates by managing and regulating emotions. Consistent with prior research, participants viewed emotion regulation as a tool military leaders can use to cultivate a positive work environment (Kaplan et al., 2012; Shipman et al., 2010). To illustrate:

If I come to work mad, everybody below me is not going to be happy. If I come to work happy, ready to do my job... it's contagious. So if you come to work motivated and happy, and motivate your Soldiers, it's contagious...

You cannot ever cease to be a source of rational leadership, you cannot get so close that you are now emotionally tied to people you will have to order to their death, if that makes any sense... I don't mean just shed tears - publicly lose complete control of their faculties. They could do that privately, they can do that in my office with me, that's cool. I understand that, that's a healthy release of emotion that should happen. Because when the platoon sergeant sheds tears when he's talking to his guys, but he's still visibly fighting to maintain rational leadership, and when he comes and loses it in my office, that's great, that's healthy...

Army Leadership Doctrine also states that military leaders can develop a positive climate by actively listening to all perspectives and by allowing subordinates to voice honest opinions without fear of retribution (U.S. Department of the Army, 2006). In nine passages military leaders indicated that encouraging open dialogue contributes to both a positive work environment and to organizational success. For example:

When I tell Soldiers to do something, I usually try to say, "We're doing this because of this." That way they know why we are doing this; and, if while they are doing the action, if they see a better way to accomplish the

end goal, they can come back and say, “Hey sir, what about this.”

I knew where he wanted me to focus and things that I needed to... look at or things that my unit needed to do better. It was more of a two-way conversation, me telling him things that I thought needed to be changed and him telling me what we could do about it.

I think the ability to listen, not just to your superiors and your peers, but also your subordinates, is pretty critical to success. If you’re too stubborn to acknowledge that fact that, “Hey, I might be wrong,” or somebody else has a better way of doing it, regardless of their rank or who they are, you can set yourself up for failure... Every person is going to have something important or [some] knowledge that is going to affect your performance as a unit. So being able to listen and being able to grasp those pieces of knowledge [is important].

An additional nine Soldier reports indicated tolerating mistakes was key to establishing positive climate. Consistent with Army Leadership Doctrine, these leaders made their subordinates feel that an honest effort - even when mistakes were made - was appreciated (U.S. Department of the Army, 2006). According to participants, military leaders who willingly tolerate risk are better able to provide subordinates with opportunities for development. The following excerpts are examples of how military leaders establish a positive work environment by accepting risk and tolerating mistakes:

[Start by telling Soldiers,] “Hey we’re going to go to the field...and it doesn’t count for anything.” Make sure it’s as low stress as possible in terms of what your expectations are. [For example you might say,] “If you guys screw up, it’s not a big deal” or “Hey we’re going to do... one or two practice qualifications just to get comfortable, or try different shooting techniques... before we actually go do the qualification for record.” I think that helps a lot of Soldiers - that no-pressure repetition where you can try different things out so you get comfortable with something.

My squadron commander... set my standards and guidelines; and I knew I could go out there and screw up. And as long as I was within his left and right limits he was going to defend me - whether I got in trouble or not - or just take it as a learning experience.

According to Army Leadership Doctrine, leaders are responsible for creating a positive work climate that promotes fairness, candid communication, and is suitable for learning (U.S. Department of the Army, 2006). Military leaders who establish a positive climate are more likely to have effective interactions with their subordinates, and, as a result, more motivated Soldiers who are willing to continue the mission, even under difficult circumstances (U.S. Department of the Army, 2006). Establishing a positive climate is also an essential component of strengths-based leadership (SBL) theory. According to SBL theory, individuals are more likely to

capitalize on their talents (i.e., invest time and energy to utilize and improve their talents) when they have a safe and supportive work environment (Bowers, 2004).

### Building Subordinate Capabilities: A Higher-Order Leadership Process

*Building subordinate capabilities* was the most frequently cited higher-order category ( $n = 122$ ). The process of building subordinate capabilities involves understanding what subordinates do well, and identifying areas for growth and development. Additionally, the building capabilities process requires leaders to expand subordinates' personal and professional knowledge, skills, and abilities, in preparation for both current operations and future military roles. Leader behaviors encompassed by this category include *developing strengths*, *identifying subordinate strengths and weaknesses*, *providing individualized feedback*, *modeling*, and *fostering personal and professional development*. Several of these secondary categories unified a number of lower-order themes. For example, the secondary category *identify subordinate strengths and weaknesses* united four lower-order leader activities aimed at understanding the knowledge, skills, and abilities of subordinates. Table 3 shows the aggregation of lower-order and secondary categories associated with building subordinate capabilities.

Table 3  
*Frequency of Secondary and Lower-order Categories United Under the Higher-order Leadership Process Building Subordinate Capabilities*

Secondary and Lower-order Categories	Frequency
Providing Individualized Feedback Total	62
<i>Individualized Feedback through Counseling</i>	21
<i>Individualized Feedback through Teaching</i>	12
<i>Individualized Feedback Utilizing Assessment</i>	11
<i>Individualized Feedback through Mentoring</i>	8
<i>Individualized Feedback through Coaching</i>	6
<i>Individualized Feedback (General)</i>	4
Identifying Strengths & Weaknesses Total	50
<i>Identifying Strengths &amp; Weaknesses (General)</i>	29
<i>Identifying Strengths &amp; Weaknesses by Engaging with Soldiers</i>	11
<i>Identifying Strengths &amp; Weaknesses through Task Exposure</i>	7
<i>Identifying Strengths &amp; Weaknesses through Observation</i>	3
Developing Strengths	4
Fostering Personal/Professional Development	4
Modeling	2

*Note.* Secondary categories are not italicized, while lower-order categories are italicized.

A majority of comments subsumed by the building subordinate capabilities category focused on providing individualized feedback and identifying subordinate strengths and weaknesses. Fifty passages outlined strategies leaders use to identify subordinate strengths and areas for improvement. Strategies included observing Soldiers, talking with individual team

members, and assigning tasks to evaluate a Soldier's current knowledge, skills, and abilities. The following excerpts highlight each of these approaches to assessing the individual Soldier:

I don't think it's that difficult to see other people's strengths and weaknesses if you work with them, like actually pay attention to them while they're working. I don't think it's that difficult to notice; and I'll ask, "What are your strengths, what can you do well." If you don't ask that, and people don't take the time to really look at that, then they can't implement.

You have to be actively involved in your unit and I think that's how you identify those middle of the road [Soldiers], that's what we refer to them as, those middle of the road Soldiers that aren't trouble makers, but they're not your guys who are jumping up and down saying, "I'll do it, I'll do it." It's those middle of the road guys that you are constantly in contact with...you learn what they are good at, and it's up to you and your platoon sergeants to use what they're good at doing.

I would say just figure out the team, what their strengths are. If you just talk to them and find out what they want to be doing, what they're passionate about, what kind of job they like, then that's the first place to start [identifying strengths]. With working with them for a while...you can find out what they are good [at]. But if you talk to them and know what they want to be doing, I would say that's the first step because then they're going towards what their strengths are because they think they are good at doing this.

I think as far as identifying strengths, one of the ways for me is [to] give a leader a task and give him minimal guidance and see what happens; and just watch what [his/her] actions are, and...whether they're going to fail or succeed. Just watch what happens, make an assessment, come back and give some advice, and then replay - different scenario, same situation.

*Building subordinate capabilities* also encompassed leader behaviors geared toward coaching, counseling, and mentoring subordinates – behaviors that are vital to Army leadership. Sixty-two passages focused on providing individualized feedback. To illustrate:

You can sit here and do formal counseling all day, but sometimes the best counseling is, "Hey, come here. Let me talk to you." Out there on the range [you might say], "Hey, you know what, you're messing this up. This is the way that it needs to look, this is how you fix this." Sometimes it doesn't have to be written down... I think counseling is a very effective tool if it's used correctly.

Definitely taking time to mentor each person on your team to find out

what they want to do and help them do that. Not pressuring them to go a certain way, but to find out what they want to do next with their life or their career, and try to [help them] find solutions on how to get there or what they need to do next.

You're leading your subordinate to the answer by a series of questions that will progress you from current state to end state... I'm not just going to tell them because I'm just talking at them. You lead them to the answer in the form of discussion, and there's actually, you actually have an aim and purpose to that, it's not just random.

Consistent with Army Leadership Doctrine and strengths-based leadership theory, leaders reported using individualized feedback to capitalize on subordinate strengths while also remediating weakness. As part of the developmental process, leaders highlighted the importance of recognizing both strengths and weaknesses of subordinates, as well as leveraging strengths to overcome deficits. In particular, 13 Soldier reports coded as *providing individualized feedback* specifically focused on identifying and overcoming weaknesses. To illustrate:

My number one [strength] was mentoring because, as you know, in the position we're all in, you have to develop subordinate leaders who then affect the lives of genuine Soldiers. So with mentoring you have to be able to look at this subordinate leader and find out what their strengths are and find out what issues they're having [in order] to help them overcome the issues. So I think that is a big part of what I do that makes me successful.

You need to still improve that weaker area or at least make sure you sit down and mentor those weaker areas. Let him know how he needs to improve himself or what he needs to do to improve himself.

When you start getting into positions of leadership and greater responsibility...those Soldiers depend on you. They depend on you not only to tell them what they are doing right, but also in your eyes as their mentor, what they're doing wrong and how to fix it.

Overall, leader activities included in the higher-order category *building subordinate capabilities* align with both Army Doctrine and strengths-based leadership theory.

### **Inspiring Subordinates: A Higher-Order Leadership Process**

The actions of a leader which encourage subordinates to give maximum effort, while also building individual and unit morale, are what define the leadership process *inspiring subordinates*. In total, ninety-two passages were coded as *inspiring subordinates*. This leadership process unified five secondary categories: *motivating subordinates*, *empowering subordinates*, *reinforcing desired behaviors*, *leading by example*, and *establishing expectations/standards*. The secondary category *empowering subordinates* can be further divided into leader behaviors aimed

at building confidence, delegating tasks, encouraging independence, exposing subordinates to new task assignments, and instilling a sense of responsibility (see Table 4).

Leader actions intended to inspire subordinates may involve engaging with Soldiers directly in a motivating manner. For example, one Soldier stated:

You identify a Soldier [who], you know he's got something to offer, but he's just...doing the bare minimum... 'cause he's gotten to the point where he's disillusioned. He came into the Army with an idea of what it was going to be like, and when it wasn't like that, he gave up..., he got bored or whatever. So sometimes I take these kids aside and say, "...What do you want or what would [be] the ideal if you could snap your fingers and have whatever you want? Remember how you felt the day you enlisted?" So sometimes we just got to figure out what they're not happy with.

Table 4  
*Frequency of Secondary and Lower-order Categories United Under the Higher-order Leadership Process Inspiring Subordinates*

Secondary and Lower-order Categories	Frequency
Empowering Subordinates Total	43
<i>Empowering by Delegating</i>	14
<i>Empowering through Task Exposure</i>	11
<i>Empowering through Confidence Building</i>	9
<i>Empowering by Instilling Independence</i>	6
<i>Empowering through Instilling a Sense of Responsibility</i>	3
Motivating	16
Reinforcing	14
Establishing Expectations/Standards	12
Leading By Example	7

*Note.* Secondary categories are not italicized, while lower-order categories are italicized.

Providing opportunities for subordinates to broaden their knowledge, skills, and abilities by engaging in new task assignments - often without direct guidance from senior leadership - is another method of inspiring junior leaders. Forty-three comments outlined leader strategies aimed at empowering subordinate leaders. Often hands-off, these approaches are typified by the following leader comment:

[In order to] delegate and empower that Soldier [say], "Listen, here's a mission I know at your level that you can handle. I'm giving you authority to go make it happen." And you know, I'm sitting up here and I'm watching, of course, but I'm also letting that Soldier go handle their business, to the point where they're either going to be successful or they're going to start to fail. And we can't let them fail no matter what [so]

that's where we pick somebody else to get it done; say, "Hey, fix this." Or we do it ourselves, which could take all day long. So we empower others around him, [say] "Hey, monitor this while he goes and executes this. Don't get in his business, let him execute."....And then if you see things going bad, you can step in, but let them go through the task and come back and back brief.

Consistent with Army Leadership Doctrine and SBL theory (Bowers, 2004; U.S. Department of the Army, 2006), positive reinforcement in the form of incentives (e.g., time off) and rewards (e.g., praise and recognition) was cited 13 times as a strategy for inspiring subordinates. In one example a Soldier stated, "I like to walk around a lot and ask a lot of questions, and when I find out that something went well, I find out who made it go smoothly. So yes, reinforcing them. Nothing cheesy like, 'Hey dude, nice job.' I just, in our term or lingo, say, 'Hey man, did a good job yesterday.'" Leaders also cited innovative strategies for rewarding desirable behavior that simultaneously discouraged dangerous or otherwise detrimental behaviors. The following is an excerpt which highlights the informal mechanisms leaders use to reinforce subordinates:

So we had all these guys who were the bad dudes. We put them into a single platoon [called the drop platoon], which...gets the [bad] guys away from the good guys... And then the First Sergeant would come out and be like, "Drop platoon, guess what? You're in charge of PT [Physical Training] for this whole weekend, and you're doing the Detail on Saturday." It's a form of corrective training as well, but it is also a form of giving those people [who performed well] the weekend off - you know, "You did a great job this week, you guys shot great, we're not going to mess with you this weekend, we're not going to take the time away from you or your family."

By motivating and inspiring subordinates, leaders can contribute to effective task performance. The following comment illustrates the benefits associated with the leadership process *inspiring subordinates*:

I think if you're willing to let the squad leaders and section leaders do what they're supposed to do and take that responsibility, I think you'll have a better leader... You might be like, "Okay, I don't really want to pass this off, this may come back to bite me..., [but] go ahead and execute." And if you give that Soldier that responsibility, ...he's [not only] a more competent Soldier, but also maybe he's a Soldier less likely to, in his off-time, get into trouble because he's been given some responsibility.

### **Caring for Soldiers: A Higher-Order Leadership Process**

Thirty-two reports described a process through which leaders get to know Soldiers on a personal level in order to ensure they have the resources necessary to face personal and



professional challenges. This process, labeled *caring for Soldiers*, unified two secondary categories: *taking care of Soldiers* and *relationship/rapport building*.

Nineteen passages were labeled *taking care of Soldiers* – these passages described how leaders demonstrate concern for Soldiers who face challenges in their personal lives. For example, one leader stated:

You have a lot of different problems in the Army when it comes to [a Soldiers'] personal life that you have to be able to, first of all, see...and then assess and develop some kind of action in order to help that Soldier. That goes a lot further than almost anything you can do for a Soldier...Take time to fix a problem - that carries major weight. That tells that Soldier that you care and you're here for them and not high and mighty above them, and you're willing to get down in the trenches and identify a problem and fix it for them.

In 13 passages *caring for Soldiers* specifically involved creating and maintaining interpersonal relationships with junior leaders. As such, *relationship/rapport building* was seen as a lower-order category encompassed by this higher-order theme. For instance:

If your leadership is talking to you based on the fact that [they need] to check the box, you know that they don't care about you. It's important to me that my commander cares whether or not my kids are doing good in school...what it [spending 13 months in Iraq] does to a 5-year-old and 7-year-old and 11-year-old...It's important that he knows me as an officer, just like I need to know my privates.

Nine passages were classified as both *caring for Soldiers* and *building subordinate capabilities*, highlighting the relationship between these two leader activities. As an example, one officer stated "Showing that interest in that Soldier by developing him, he feels like he wants to stay. [He might say to himself], 'The squad leader genuinely cares about me. I feel like I'm on the right path.'"

Caring for Soldiers is relevant to both strengths-based leadership theory and Army Doctrine. According to Army Leadership Doctrine, taking care of Soldiers requires finding out about a Soldier's personal state on a particular day. This concern for the welfare of subordinates is related to a leader's ability to maximize performance. Specifically, Soldiers and civilians will be more willing to work hard for leaders who show concern for their personal well-being (Rath & Conchie, 2008; U.S. Department of the Army, 2006).

### **Managing Teams: A Higher-Order Leadership Process**

The higher-order leadership process *managing teams* was cited forty-two times during interviews with Soldiers. Behaviors incorporated under this theme include efforts to make the most of available resources (*task management*) and attempts to capitalize on the strengths of individual team members (*utilizing subordinate strengths*).

Nine passages described assigning subordinates to positions which maximize personnel resources. The following quote illustrates how leaders manage tasks in an effort to create a more equitable work environment.

You have some guys in some units that have like eight jobs and some that have zero. You've got to spread that wealth. You're not helping that guy bring his weaknesses up if you keep pushing him to that corner.

Thirty-three passages were categorized as *utilizing subordinate strengths*. The following excerpts exemplify leaders' attempts to assign the "right person to the task at hand."

I kind of see it like coaches. We find the people that are good at certain things, and we put them all together and that makes us a grand-slam team.

At the end of the day I would assign the lieutenant who had great communication skills to be the guy who would interact at a more complex level with the Iraqi Security forces, and the guy that was completely inarticulate, but could kick down the door and do raids, is the guy I would generally assign to more kinetic operations...

Regardless of what your rank is, you want to put the most competent person in whatever job it is for the betterment of the unit...Otherwise you're just playing on the old Army system of, "You're a Specialist, you're a Sergeant, put the Sergeant in charge." That can be detrimental.

In four passages team management processes overlapped with behaviors that might also be categorized as *caring for Soldiers*. To illustrate:

So the first thing I wrote down was taking care of others. I think that I was very good at being a team leader in that I was able to take care of my Soldiers, and really lead them and push them to be the best that they can be...to find out what they wanted to do next or to decide what their strengths were on our specific team and delegate those specific tasks to them.

I put a circle around those things [potential, initiative, and motivation] and I assess and isolate them right away; and from there that is how I determine how I should employ those subordinates. But [I'm] real careful not to over look the root of their problems, 'cause they're not going to tell you. You got to see and look into it.

Future iterations of data analysis may subsume these two themes under one higher-order category.

## Developing Self: A Higher-Order Leadership Process

Three Soldiers described engaging in behaviors aimed at self-improvement. While only a few Soldiers spoke on the issue of self-development, these data should not be interpreted as implying self-development is unimportant to military leaders. The process of self-development, which is geared toward improving a leader's own knowledge, skills, and abilities, is directly related to a leader's ability to develop junior officers. In the current sample, leaders mentioned seeking feedback from peers, as well as learning from one's own experience and the experience of others, as relevant to the development of subordinate leaders.

Comments made by Soldiers are consistent with the Army's assertion that leaders must maximize their own potential in order to successfully develop subordinates. According to Army Leadership Doctrine, to improve their proficiency, Army leaders should adopt a lifelong approach to learning by looking for new learning opportunities, asking questions, seeking training opportunities, and requesting performance critiques (U.S. Department of the Army, 2006). This lifelong approach to learning ensures leaders remain viable as a professional corps. In addition, both strengths-based leadership theory and Army Leadership Doctrine suggest that competent leaders are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses (U.S. Department of the Army, 2006). Greater exploration of the data is needed to fully understand the extent to which military leaders intentionally apply their own strengths to the job of leading.

## The Relationship among Identifying, Utilizing, and Empowering Subordinates

Leader development encompasses a set of complex, interrelated behaviors. Given this, two or more codes (leader development themes) were frequently assigned to the same passage of text. While overlapping codes were discussed in prior sections, special attention should be given to the relationship between identifying strengths and weaknesses, utilizing subordinate talents, and empowering subordinate leaders. At the core of SBL theory is the goal of developing and empowering subordinates to be independent, adaptable, and resourceful leaders. Consistent with SBL theory, results of the present research support a considerable overlap between leader behaviors aimed at identifying and utilizing subordinate strengths and those geared toward empowering junior leaders (see Table 5). Eight Soldier reports emphasized a relationship between *empowering subordinates* and *identifying strengths and weaknesses*. As an example, one Soldier stated, "Finding that strength...makes them part of the team. That [is] empowerment. [They might say] 'Man I'm finally part of something,' and then you start working on the well-rounded things you need to work on." An additional eight reports highlighted the overlap between *empowering subordinates* and *utilizing subordinate strengths*. The following excerpt illustrates the relationship between these two leader behaviors: "So this new kid shows up and I identify his strength right away from his prior experience and I capitalize on that. So you start empowering the kid right away...that right there starts that ball rolling - for that kid right there, that ball's rolling. So when you capitalize on their strengths they might have from prior deployment or [from a] prior unit or from the civilian life, that's how we utilize that [strength]." Finally, as the previous passage demonstrates, *identifying subordinate strengths and weaknesses* and *utilizing subordinate strengths* were also frequently associated with one another. Specifically, 15 passages demonstrated a relationship between understanding a Soldier's talents

and areas for growth and assigning subordinates to tasks based on knowledge of their strengths and/or weaknesses.

### **Discussion**

This research examined strengths-based leadership theory, its compatibility with Army Doctrine, and its relation to current leader development practices. Overall, results suggest that leader development practices identified by participants are congruent with both Army Doctrine and strengths-based leadership theory. Identified leader processes are also consistent with existing leader competency models (Steele & Garven, 2009; Yukl, 2002), providing additional support for the research findings.

Table 5  
*Number of Times Secondary Codes were Applied Simultaneously to the Same Passage of Text*

Code	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
1 Positive Climate (Approachability)	<b>1</b>	1		1			1									1	3		
2 Positive Climate (Emotion Regulation)	1	<b>4</b>					1	1											
3 Positive Climate (Evaluating Thru Observation)			<b>1</b>																
4 Positive Climate (Open Communication)	1			<b>5</b>				1			1						2		
5 Positive Climate (Tolerating Risk/Mistakes)								1			1	7	1						
6 Developing Strengths							1			1		2		1					
7 Identifying Strengths & Weaknesses Total	1	1				1	<b>13</b>	13			1	8		2		3	1		15
8 Providing Individualized Feedback Total		1		1	1		13	<b>31</b>	1		2	3	6	2	1	2	3	1	2
9 Modeling								1	<b>1</b>										
10 Fostering Personal/Professional Development						1				<b>2</b>	1			2					
11 Motivating				1	1		1	2		1	<b>3</b>	2		4	2	1	1		2
12 Empowering Subordinates					7	2	8	3			2	<b>17</b>	1	1		2		3	8
13 Establishing Expectations/Standards					1			6				1	<b>3</b>		1	1			
14 Reinforcing						1	2	2		2	4	1		<b>3</b>	1	1	2		1
15 Leading By Example								1			2		1	1	<b>4</b>	1			
16 Taking Care of Soldiers	1						3	2			1	2	1	1	1	<b>6</b>	4		4
17 Relationship/Rapport Building	3			2			1	3			1			2		4	<b>1</b>		
18 Task Management								1				3						<b>5</b>	2
19 Utilizing Subordinate Strengths							15	2			2	8		1		4		2	<b>9</b>

*Note.* Bolded numbers along the diagonal represent the number of times a code was applied independently from other codes. The numbers off-diagonal represent the number of times codes were applied simultaneously. For example, Relationship/Rapport Building was applied in conjunction with Positive Climate (Approachability) three times. Given that passages could be assigned multiple codes (i.e., Relationship/Rapport Building could overlap with Positive Climate (Approachability) and Individualized Feedback (Mentoring)), numbers in this table do not total those presented in Tables 2-4.

Military leaders interviewed for this project report using a variety of strategies for developing subordinates. The most widely cited methods can be categorized as providing individualized feedback, identifying strengths and weaknesses, empowering subordinate leaders, and utilizing subordinate strengths during team and task assignments. These broad categories encompass specific leader development behaviors. For example, providing individualized feedback may involve giving feedback on demonstrated performance (*counseling*), educating others by providing knowledge (*teaching*), developing a relationship with a person of lesser experience (*mentoring*), utilizing assessment to provide feedback on a subordinate's strengths and weaknesses (*assessment*), and utilizing guided questions to move a subordinate along a developmental path (*coaching*). Similarly, identifying strengths and weaknesses might take place by observing subordinates carry out tasks (*identifying strengths and weaknesses through observation*) and empowering subordinate leaders could involve giving subordinates opportunities to complete tasks free of direct supervision (*empowering by delegating*).

The results of this research indicate a considerable overlap between techniques military leaders use to develop subordinates and strategies supported by SBL theory. For example:

- Military leaders report utilizing observation and job assignments to identify what subordinates do well. They also report using task assignments as opportunities to practice existing skills and to build on inherent abilities. According to strengths-based leadership theory, optimizing and capitalizing on talents occurs when individuals invest time and energy to improve their talents (Hodges & Clifton, 2004); and strengths-based leaders have been known to use team and task assignments to identify and grow existing talent (Rath & Conchie, 2008).
- By paying close attention to existing talent, strengths-based leaders also aim to build effective teams (Rath & Conchie, 2008). According to military leaders, utilizing subordinate strengths plays a significant role in team management and effective use of personnel resources.
- Soldiers cite the importance of an open, fair, and stable work environment for subordinate leader development. Establishing a positive climate is also a central component of strengths-based leadership (SBL) theory. According to SBL theory, individuals are more likely to capitalize on their talents (i.e., invest time and energy to utilize and improve their talents) when leaders provide a safe and supportive work environment (Bowers, 2004).
- At the core of SBL theory is the goal of developing and empowering subordinates to be independent, adaptable, and resourceful leaders. According to participants, allowing subordinates to take independent action without direct guidance from senior leadership and increasing subordinate self-efficacy through task assignments are key leader development behaviors.

Examination of SBL and Army Doctrine reveal a number of corresponding ideas regarding leader development. For example, both strengths-based leadership theory and Army Doctrine suggest that competent leaders are aware of their own strengths. Furthermore, akin to

SBL, Army Doctrine highlights the importance of providing honest feedback to each subordinate regarding his or her strengths and areas for improvement. Army Doctrine also encourages leaders, in conjunction with subordinates, to develop plans for leveraging strengths to correct identified deficits (U.S. Department of the Army, 2006). These areas of agreement between SBL and Army Doctrine may help explain why leader development strategies reported by military leaders are comparable to strategies supported by SBL.

The practice of identifying and utilizing subordinate strengths has a number of potential benefits for military leaders. Opportunities to participate in task assignments that utilize individual talents provide a means of strengthening those talents, increasing the likelihood that a subordinate will achieve consistent, near perfect, performance in a given activity. Integrating strengths into an individual's day-to-day activities also increases the likelihood that subordinates will make use of a particular talent in the future (Bowers, 2004). In addition, identification and utilization of strengths is likely to increase productivity and job satisfaction - two outcomes that are particularly relevant to the Army's goals of meeting mission requirements and long-term retention of Soldiers. Findings reported herein also show a considerable overlap between identification and utilization of subordinate's strengths and subordinate empowerment. Empowering subordinates by assisting them in discovering and leveraging their strengths can have many advantages. Soldiers who feel empowered are more likely to take on additional responsibilities – they are also more capable of finding solutions to problems while working independently of leadership. The ability to function autonomously is especially important in the current operational environment where Soldiers may be forced make decisions without direct guidance from their commanding officer. Furthermore, these advantages run parallel to the military's goal of attracting highly talented individuals, developing adaptable Soldiers, and retaining high-quality Soldiers beyond their initial enlistment or commission. In practice, the benefits of utilizing individual strengths can be seen in the following comment from a participating leader:

If you don't do it [apply strengths and weaknesses], everybody's going to be equally poor and if...everybody's equal, but they are equally poor, they got nothing. Same thing applies [in the military]... [take] the lieutenant who can't organize anything but has great interpersonal skills and can talk to an Iraqi, he'd be great with the organizational superstar platoon sergeant, and you got to dialogue with your squadron commander or battalion commander to make sure that happens. Then you have now set that formation up for success, and it's a continued back and forth dialogue that allows you to go develop things. And if you cease to do that then you are no longer doing your job as an Army leader...If you fail to do it, then you're sunk and your organization cannot be what it could be, what it can be when you take the time to do your job as an Army leader.

Whereas both commissioned and non-commissioned Soldiers acknowledge the importance of identifying and utilizing subordinate strengths, military leaders also report spending significant time and energy attempting to remediate weaknesses. According to interviewees, one potential downside to the practice of focusing primarily on poor performers is that mid- to top-performers receive little-to-no formal or informal development. This lapse in

subordinate development - combined with a failure to reward Soldiers for their good efforts and an over-reliance on top-performers - may contribute to burn-out and attrition from the military. The following examples illustrate these potential concerns:

We had one guy who was, you know, getting into something every weekend... that section chief had to do like ten SIRs [serious incident reports] on this guy. Instead of training up all the good guys he has to devote his time to this one person and the other guys who want to be there are like, “We don’t know what to do, we can’t be that good Soldier...we’re not proficient in the skills in our MOS [military occupational specialty] because of that one person.”

Ten percent [of Soldiers] take up 90% of your time... instead of being able to reward [good performance] with mentorship and positive counseling, we reward it by sending them to advanced training, ‘cause we really don’t have the time, as a platoon leader and platoon sergeant, to sit down and do development with them.

I’ve been caught up in [a] type of situation where I was good at whatever the First Sergeant needed me to do, but then I got stuck there ‘cause he could depend on me. So now I try not to do that [overwork my Soldiers]...but you always got that one guy you can go to and you know that [they’re] not going to require a lot of guidance, not going to require a lot of direction.

Although the amount of time spent identifying areas of concern was a source of frustration, it was also seen as an important part of providing accurate feedback to subordinates. These findings suggest that military leaders, whose jobs may hold life-or-death consequences, cannot overlook the negative. To illustrate:

You also need to identify the weaknesses. You can’t just tell somebody they’re great at this and not tell them what they are bad at. And if they’re bad enough to the point where it needs to go down on paper, there needs to be an effect [on] where their career goes from there. We need leaders to make that honest assessment and do the hard thing of checking that block that says ‘refer to report’ on the OER [Officer Evaluation Report].

Based on the results of the present research, military leaders must balance the need to remediate weaknesses with the desire to nurture subordinate strengths. This need for military leaders to focus on remediating weaknesses is not inconsistent with strengths-based leadership theory. Both strengths-based leadership theory and Army Leadership Doctrine encourage leaders to progressively leverage strengths to correct identified weaknesses (Rath & Conchie, 2008; U.S. Department of the Army, 2006). Examples provided by interviewees afford some insight into how military leaders might capitalize on and improve the talents of subordinates while simultaneously addressing areas of concern. For example, one leader stated, “If I’m not a



confident person...find something I'm great at...and have me work on that...[That] builds confidence to work on things I'm not good at."

Army guidelines (U.S. Department of the Army, 2006) provide both formal and informal methods for developing subordinate leaders. For example, FM 6-22 describes the Army's after-action review process as a tool that can be used to examine one's own behavior and interactions with others. Counseling, coaching, and mentoring (as defined in FM 6-22) are additional strategies for assessing developmental needs, providing feedback to others, and developing specific courses of action to improve subordinates' performance. When asked about subordinate development Soldiers often describe the type of developmental activities outlined in the Army leadership manual. The strategies identified by interviewees are also congruent with a strengths-based approach. Unfortunately, interviews with Soldiers suggest that many of these strategies are not employed on a consistent basis, or are not utilized effectively. Soldiers cite the lack of time between deployments, the burden of automatic promotions, problems associated with accurate evaluation reports (Non-commissioned Officer Evaluation Report and Commissioned Officer Evaluation Report), and high personnel turnover rates as barriers to subordinate development. Attitudes toward leader development are also thought to contribute to the lack of subordinate development in the military. Specifically, in the current operational environment, military leaders often assign a lower priority to developmental activities.

Without adequate mentoring and development of junior leaders, the U.S. military will likely encounter a shortage of talent needed to meet the demands of war. Because subordinate development is key to building a strong future fighting force, more effort is needed to understand and address the current deficit in leader development and mentoring. Based on their understanding of the constraints of the current operational environment and difficulties associated with implementing system wide changes, military leaders stress the need for informal strategies for development that can be utilized in multiple contexts. Findings from the present investigation suggest training leaders to identify subordinates talents and areas for growth, provide informal feedback, utilize subordinates strengths, and empowering subordinate leaders during day-to-day activities. Introducing leaders to the ideas contained within the higher-order leadership processes could produce Soldiers who are more motivated, more satisfied with their jobs, and more efficient overall – benefits which are relevant to the U.S. Army's goal of building adaptable leaders and retaining Soldiers past their initial enlistment or commission.

## **Limitations and Future Directions**

One limitation of the present research is the lack of information regarding *effective* strategies for developing subordinates from a strengths-based perspective. While this research gathered data that describes different strategies leaders use, more research is needed to assist leaders in determining which strategies for identifying and utilizing subordinate strengths are most effective across various contexts (e.g., garrison versus theater). Barriers to utilizing a strengths-based approach were also brought to light during interviews with Soldiers. While the present research did not adequately explore the barriers cited by Soldiers, future research could provide recommendations for addressing the lack of time between deployments, the burden that automatic promotions may be placing on the Army, problems associated with formal evaluation reports, and high personnel turnover rates.

Finally, it should be noted that participants were prompted to provide feedback on specific questions regarding subordinate leader development (e.g., strategies for identifying, building on, and utilizing subordinates strengths and weaknesses; the utility of strengths-based leadership for the military). These prompts may have led participants to over-report strategies consistent with strengths-based leadership theory. These prompts may have also caused participants to overlook categories of leader development. While aspects of the performance domain could potentially be underrepresented by this research, participants did provide strategies that fell outside the SBL domain (e.g., establishing expectations, modeling desired behavior, building subordinate capacity through personal and professional development, assigning subordinates to tasks to create a more equitable work environment). Furthermore, the end results are consistent with other competency models (Steele & Garven, 2009; Yukl, 2002), providing some support for the conclusions drawn by the authors. However, future research is needed to corroborate the findings presented in this report.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the results of the present research, current military leader development practices appear compatible with leader behaviors supported by strengths-based leadership theory. While Army Doctrine highlights the importance of understanding what individuals do well, as well as areas for growth and development, strengths-based leadership theory provides specific avenues for identifying subordinate talents and building strengths through job assignments and developmental work experiences. An increased emphasis on intentionally identifying and utilizing strengths could lead to benefits which are relevant to the Army's organizational goals. For example, Soldiers who invest time and energy to improve their talents may be more likely to develop consistent, near perfect performance in given activities. This focus on maximum human potential could serve Soldiers well at all stages of their military careers. Strengths-based leadership practices have also been associated with increased productivity, innovation, and job satisfaction - outcomes that are consistent with the Army's goals of meeting mission requirements, building adaptable leaders, and retaining Soldiers past their initial enlistment or commission. Military leaders who were interviewed for the present project acknowledged benefits of utilizing a strengths-based approach to developing subordinates (e.g., increased motivation, efficiency, retention, and satisfaction among military leaders); however, they also recognized the importance of remediating weaknesses among military leaders. While not incompatible with strengths-based leadership, more research is needed to understand how military leaders can strike a balance between building strengths and remediating weaknesses of junior leaders.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Questions Used During Data Collection Sessions**

#### General development/counseling

- How often do you think you should sit down and have a formal counseling session with your subordinates?
- What do you see as the purpose of the counseling session? What should the counseling process look like?
- What kind of things do you think should be assessed [during counseling]? What kinds of skills are important [in a military leader]?
- According to the FM, developing Soldiers is important, and being able to identify what works for someone - or what needs improvement - is important. How should [the Army] develop Soldiers?
- What helps you identify what [Soldiers] do well/areas for improvement?
- How do you intentionally develop subordinates?
- Were the things you do well learned through experience or were they taught/developed in the military context? How so?
- If you are actively developing someone what does that look like?
- Have you ever had a good OER? What did that experience look like?
- Have you ever had an experience where somebody sat down and said, these are things you need to work on, these are things you do well? What was the outcome of that experience?
- Does good mentorship make a difference? What difference did it make in your military career?
- What can the Army do to retain good Soldiers (i.e., how can the Army retain talented individuals past their initial commission)?

#### Identifying subordinate strengths

- How do you identify someone's strengths? or Are there specific strategies you use to identify what a person is good at?
- Are there informal processes taking place [to identify a subordinates strength]?

#### Building strengths

- What helps you develop strengths in your subordinates?
- How do you hone subordinate strengths?

#### Utilizing subordinate strengths/Building teams

- In what ways are you able to utilize subordinate strengths? Do you feel like you act intentionally?
- Can you think of a time when you had a Soldier who was problematic or not performing at the level you wanted, and you found something they were good at and that made a difference?
- How do you identify which person is the best person for the job [or role on a team]?
- How do you go about putting together a winning team?
- How does utilizing subordinate strengths contribute to your ability to meet your objectives? or What happens when you are able to assign people to specific positions that

play to their strengths? or Do you see any benefits from being able to assign people to certain tasks that play to their strengths?

#### Leveraging strengths to overcome weaknesses (FM 6-22)

- What does it mean to leverage strengths to overcome weaknesses (as in FM 6-22) - what does that look like when it's applied?

#### Leader's own strengths and application to military subordinate development

- What sort of strengths do you possess? Which of those help you meet military objectives?
- Do you feel like you are able to utilize [your strengths] on a daily basis, and secondly, is it intentional?
- How do your specific strengths help you mentor and coach subordinates?

#### Leader self-development

- How did you develop an awareness of your own personal strengths?
- What helps you build on [your strengths] and what gets in the way; what helps you utilize your strengths and what gets in the way?
- In what situations or contexts are you really able to put your strengths to work for you? Are there things you do to set the situation up so you can capitalize on your strengths?
- Have you ever had an experience where somebody (1) talked to you about what you do well, (2) talked about how you could utilize your abilities/skills in a military context, or (3) assigned you to a task that allowed you to utilize something you already do well?
- Has anyone ever had a formal or informal discussion with you about what you do well or tried to help you develop something that seemed like a skill or ability?
- Did you have someone who actively took a role in assigning you to positions where you could flourish? If so, what did that look like – what was the outcome?
- When you engage in self development, does it ever include activities that actively stretch and grow a particular strength? What do you do to build on what you already do well?

#### Advantages and disadvantages of utilizing a strengths-based approach

- Should the Army spend time trying to develop strengths? What are the advantages and disadvantages of investing in Soldier strengths?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of assigning Soldiers to tasks based on personal strengths?
- What kinds of barriers prevent Soldiers from identifying/developing/utilizing their strengths? What can you do [to develop and mentor subordinates] given the constraints identified?

#### Application in a military context

- If the Army was going to spend money on a program to help you identify what your subordinates do well and to help you utilize your subordinates' strengths, what would that look like? What would you do differently [from the current status quo]?
- What are the implications, both positive and negative, of a strengths-based approach to leadership [within the military]?
- Is there a place for strengths-based leadership within the Army?



## **Appendix B**

### **Theme Definitions**

**Establishing Positive Climates** – Creating a climate where subordinates can develop and hone their strengths without fear of harsh retribution. It is a leader's responsibility to ensure that the organizational climate is appropriate for the growth, development, and learning of subordinates.

**Climate (Approachability)** - The demeanor of a leader that allows subordinates to feel comfortable talking with and sharing relevant information with the leader without fear of retribution or harsh retaliation. Subordinates feel comfortable discussing professional and personal information in a non-threatening environment.

**Example:** *Being approachable. Because you need to develop a relationship with your Soldiers - even an informal one - where they are willing to listen to you... Yeah, it's that relationship building with your Soldiers, where you're still the commander, still the leader, but you're still on their level to the point that they can come to you and ask for advice or talk to you.*

**Climate (Emotion Regulation)** - Maintaining appropriate outward emotional responses in a given situation; may also involve managing the collective emotions of a team or unit.

**Examples:** *If I come to work happy, ready to do my job, it's just like being polite to somebody on the street...it's contagious. So if you come to work motivated and happy, and motivate your Soldiers, it's contagious...*

*I guess whatever problems or stress that he had coming from higher, he kind of brought it down to everybody in his shop. [In contrast] the second guy was more of a mentor because even though he was taking it from higher, he wasn't bringing it to the shop - so that allowed him to empower more people inside the shop, and they never really saw that negative side...*

**Climate (Evaluating through Observation)** – “Taking the temperature of an organization” without directly engaging with subordinates.

**Example:** *You got to listen 'cause there are signs out there and a lot of the time those signs are spoken, you don't even got to look, just close your eyes and listen. I sit in my office and close my laptop and I can hear everything that's going on in the unit, right in front of my office; and I know everything that's going on, where the issues are, what platoon is having leadership problems, what Soldiers are having personal problems... The answers are all there...*

**Climate (Allowing Open Communication)** – Listening to subordinates and taking their opinions or concerns into account when discussing organizational or team goals/missions.

**Example:** *I think the ability to listen, not just to your superiors and your peers, but also your subordinates, is pretty critical to success. If you're too stubborn to acknowledge that fact that, "Hey I might be wrong, or somebody else has a better way of doing it," regardless of their rank or who they are - you can set yourself up for failure... Every person is going to have something important or knowledgeable that is going to affect your performance as a unit, so being able to listen and being able to grasp those pieces of knowledge [is important].*

**Climate (Tolerating Risk/Mistakes)** – Accepting reasonable risk and tolerating mistakes to facilitate subordinate development.

**Examples:** *We're going to let this staff sergeant do it and something may go wrong even if he does it 100% right; and I'm willing to accept that fact and deal with the fact and say, "Ok, something happened...and that's just the nature of the beast."*

*I'll go in and talk to my boss and be like, "Hey, I know these suspenses are coming up, but I gave them to my XO and my First Sergeant and I want to see if they can do it without my guidance"...and he's like, "Roger that." If they fail they fail, and they use it as a tool [for development].*

**Building Subordinate Capabilities** – Building subordinates' personal and professional knowledge, skills, and abilities, for both current operations and future military roles.

**Developing Strengths** – Encouraging subordinates to access information, training, and task assignments that will allow them to hone their innate talents.

**Example:** *When I look at another leader and I see strengths that I would see in myself, I'm very quick to push those. Be like, "Listen, this is a way to get at it, think about it this way, work on this, blah, blah, blah." But when I see a leader who is very much the opposite, let's say he's a critical thinker that, you know, likes to use the finesse instead of brute strength; I will turn him away from my way of leadership because, I make that decision in my mind that he's not going to get it, or if he gets it, he's going to fail at executing it. So you should try this, try my weaknesses on because they seem to fit to your strengths.*

**Identifying Strengths & Weaknesses (General)** – Identifying subordinates' areas of excellence, as well as areas for growth and development.

**Example:** *You have to find out where their strengths are at and you have to mentor them in the areas that they need improvement on.*

**Identifying Strengths & Weaknesses (Engaging with Soldiers)** – Identifying strengths and weaknesses by actively communicating with, and working alongside, subordinates.

**Example:** *The Army is about people, and so to understand what a person is good at you constantly have to interact with them, and you will see changes in people over time. And you might have to reassess what you think their strengths and weaknesses might be. Plus also, as people grow they get better at certain things. You constantly, constantly, constantly have to be engaging your subordinate leaders.*

**Identifying Strengths & Weaknesses (Observation)** – Identifying strengths and weaknesses by observing subordinates carry out tasks and noting the tasks they do well, as well as those they need to improve on.

**Example:** *I don't think it's that difficult to see other people's strengths and weaknesses if you...actually pay attention to them while they're working, I don't think it's that difficult to notice.*

**Identifying Strengths & Weaknesses (Task Exposure)** – Identifying strengths and weaknesses by giving subordinates specific tasks and assessing their performance.

**Example:** *I think as far as identifying strengths, one of the ways for me is [to] give a leader a task and give him minimal guidance and see what happens; and just watch what [his/her] actions are...Just watch what happens, make an assessment, come back and give some advice, and then replay - different scenario, same situation.*

**Individualized Feedback (Utilizing Assessment)** – Accurately evaluating subordinates' strengths and weaknesses during formal evaluations so that future leaders have a comprehensive idea of what a subordinate is capable of.

**Example:** *It would be really nice to see evaluations that are more accurate... It would be nice for, like when you have a change in battalion or brigade-level leadership, if they could have accurate counselings and accurate evaluations to fall back on and say this is the quality of this person that I am working with here and this is the position they should be going into.*

**Individualized Feedback (Coaching)** – Utilizing observable data, provocative questions, expertise, and a safe, supportive relationship that guides subordinates in creating solutions and development paths forward (U.S. Department of the Army, 2010).

**Example:** *I went over to a Soldier who was, she was very disorganized,*

*and instead of taking over I wanted to develop her; and what I did was I gave her ideas of how to organize and let her figure out what works best for her... It came out that the filing system I set up for her didn't work for her, so she changed it; and that's good, as long as she figured out... what works [for her].*

**Individualized Feedback (Counseling)** – Reviewing demonstrated performance and potential with subordinates (U.S. Department of the Army, 2010).

**Example:** *It helps me, but it also develops the people below me, because I'm telling them what they need to work on... And everybody doesn't leave on a good note, I got it. So I start with, "This is what you're weak on, this is what you're good at, and you need to work on this, and you come back next week and tell me what your plan is on how you're going to fix this."*

**Individualized Feedback (Mentoring)** – The voluntary developmental relationship that exists between a person of greater experience and a person of lesser experience that is characterized by mutual trust and respect (U.S. Department of the Army, 2010).

**Example:** *He basically showed me what he believed was right and I sat there and listened and learned; and sat me down and told me that in order to be successful in the Army, support the war, you always have a two-year plan and things like that... So he sat me down and went over all these benchmarks that he would expect me to try and hit if I wanted to be as successful as he was... He gave me planning capability, told me about schools, special duty assignments that put you at an advantage when it comes to things like promotions.*

**Individualized Feedback (Teaching)** – A process in which individuals with specific content expertise educate others by providing knowledge and materials relative to the content (U.S. Department of the Army, 2010).

**Example:** *My point is that one of my strengths is... that I'm a good teacher, and I have the ability to maintain and recite large amounts of information. Now that in itself doesn't make me a good leader, but it helps me as a teacher. So what I ended up doing [was] I basically took... everything I had just learned as a lieutenant at the school house, took out the stuff that they didn't really need to know, and basically retrained them...*

**Modeling** – Demonstrating an action in a manner that subordinates can observe and learn from; can be a singular task or more complex aspects of leadership such as emotion regulation, task assignment, or mentorship.

**Example:** *[I] think that mentorship, face-to-face mentorship, and having them observe you while you're at your best, or worst, I think is the best*

*thing that senior officers...can do.*

**Fostering Personal/Professional Development** – Supporting opportunities for subordinates to learn new skills or become more proficient at their position; also refers to the responsibility a military leader has to provide guidance and support in Soldiers' personal lives.

**Example:** *I've been sending some of my good guys to advanced medical training, which is what they want to do. It kind of keeps them motivated. It's kind of a reward system for them and lets them get out of here to go get some professional development.*

**Inspiring Subordinates** – The actions of a leader which encourage subordinates to give maximum effort, while also building individual and unit morale.

**Motivating** – The actions of a leader which encourage subordinates to immerse themselves in their responsibilities and maintain maximum effort expenditure even through adversity.

**Example:** *You allow them to make mistakes and then you take the blow. You take the hit, and they see that; and like we said earlier, they see it and they say, "Wow, I'm covered. All I got to do is do my thing." It motivates them.*

**Empowering (Confidence Building)** – Empowering subordinates in a way that will increase positive thoughts about themselves and their abilities.

**Example:** *If I'm not a confident person...find something I'm great at...and have me work on that...[That] builds confidence to work on things I'm not good at.*

**Empowering (Delegating)** – Providing a subordinate with the authority to complete a task – can occur without direct guidance from senior leadership.

**Example:** *Delegating and empower that Soldier. [Say], "Listen, here's a mission I know [is] at your level that you can handle. I'm giving you authority to go make it happen." And you know, I'm sitting up here and I'm watching of course, but I'm also letting that Soldier go handle their business...Let him execute, or her, let them execute; and then if you see things going bad, you can step in, but let them go through the task and come back and back brief. So we empower Soldiers, that's got to be a strength of a leader these days or they're going to lose it.*

**Empowering (Instilling Independence)** – Providing opportunities for subordinates to discover answers and actions needed to complete an assignment, without the assistance of their leader.

**Example:** *You have to give them room. That's not something I'm actually particularly good at because being invested ... is probably one of my strengths and one of my weaknesses. I try to look at people around me and try to be like, "Ok, I have to back off now." And you know, smack myself on the hand. Every once in a while I just need to back off and sit down and be quiet.*

**Empowering (Sense of Responsibility)** – Allowing subordinates to take ownership of a task and make it their own - creates a strong feeling of association with that task and the outcome/consequence.

**Example:** *I think if you're willing to let the squad leaders and section leaders do what they're supposed to do and take that responsibility, I think you'll have a better leader... You might be like, "Okay, I don't really want to pass this off, this may come back to bite me..., [but] go ahead and execute." And if you give that Soldier that responsibility, ...he's [not only] a more competent Soldier, but also maybe he's a Soldier less likely to, in his off-time, get into trouble because he's been given some responsibility.*

**Empowering (Task Exposure)** – Providing opportunities for subordinates to broaden their knowledge, skills, and/or abilities by engaging in new task assignments.

**Example:** *The person may not even have that skill set, but they're responsible enough...so you hand them additional jobs that require new skill sets and they go out and acquire that skill to complete the mission.*

**Establishing Expectations/Standards** – Setting guidelines and policies for subordinate and unit success. Standards are set for both personal and professional behavior.

**Example:** *I made it personal to make sure my subordinates were well aware of what I expected of them and how they were doing.*

**Reinforcing** – Encouraging positive behaviors through the use of reinforcement and punishment techniques (both positive and negative).

**Example:** *So we had all these guys who were the bad dudes. We put them into a single platoon, which...gets the [bad] guys away from the good guys... And then the First Sergeant would come out and be like..."Drop platoon, guess what? You're in charge of PT [Physical Training] for this whole weekend, and you're doing the Detail on Saturday." It's a form of corrective training as well, but it is also a form of giving those people [who performed well] the weekend off - you know, "You did a great job this week, you guys shot great, we're not going to mess with you this weekend, we're not going to take the time away from you or your family."*

**Leading by Example** – Setting a personal example of the values, morals, ethics, and behaviors Soldiers should adhere to.

**Example:** *We're trying to get these younger Soldiers to follow us; and if we just sit there and tell them to do it and they're not seeing us physically doing it with them, they're saying, "Ok, well it's easy for you to sit there and tell me to do this, but it'd be better if [you were], you know, out there doing five mile runs down battalion avenue and...doing the ruck marches." We have to be there, otherwise they don't see us doing [it and] they're like, "Ok, whatever."*

**Caring for Soldiers** – Getting to know Soldiers on a personal level in order to ensure they have the resources necessary to face personal and professional challenges.

**Taking Care of Soldier** – Making sure Soldiers faced with challenges in their personal lives have the resources to persevere and overcome hardship.

**Example:** *I call it tough love. I tell you like this, "Based on your performance, that's how I'm going to judge you. If you have a problem or issue or challenge," and it's the same speech I give to the team, "I'm going to make sure you're taken care of." 'Cause the Army has an agency for everything, but problems will not be an excuse for lack of or poor performance. I will not accept it; standards [are] standards...*

**Relationship/Rapport Building** – Creating and maintaining amiable interpersonal relationships with subordinates (within a professional context) that can help foster trust and respect.

**Example:** *They're giving me all this information...because I have this rapport with them. I have a rapport with Soldiers where, when they came back from mandatory leave...[I] can look at a Soldier and know, either his money was all gone he was putting in the bank from Iraq or his wife found somebody else while he was gone...*

**Managing Teams** –Delegating tasks in a manner that maximizes team efficiency and efficacy. Also encompasses utilizing subordinates' inherent strengths to complete task assignments.

**Managing Teams (Task Management)** – Assigning subordinates to positions which maximize available resources and personnel, while simultaneously striving to create a more equitable work environment.

**Example:** *You have some guys in some units that have like eight jobs and some that have zero. You've got to spread that wealth. You're not helping that guy bring his weaknesses up if you keep pushing him to that corner.*

**Managing Teams (Utilizing Subordinate Strengths)** – Assigning subordinates to positions which capitalize on their individual strengths.

***Example:** You want a different type [of] leader for different situations. So if I had five leaders and each of them had a specific strength which I could use in very different ways - they don't all have to be the well-rounded Johnny all-star -...if you can employ all that [you are given by the Army]... it turns out to be a very successful unit/very successful operation once you get all the pieces clicking."*

**Leader Self-Development** – A leader's actions to improve his/her own knowledge, skills, and abilities; generally done on the leader's own time.

***Example:** The biggest thing is talking to your peers. What one First Sergeant does well the other might not....Some get so busy competing...that they don't talk to each other. And they can learn so much by saying, "Hey man, you guys ran the range a couple weeks ago, what'd you learn from doing it?" or "Here are the problems I had."*



## Appendix C

### Higher-order, Secondary, and Lower-order Categories

